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THE MEANING

OF THE

WOMAN'S MOVEMENT

BY

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(A verbatim report of a Lecture delivered at the Portman Rooms.)

It is my business to-night not to talk about the practical details of the question of Women's Suffrage, nor of the effect that the vote is going to have on women's lives, but to go right down to the root of the matter, to ask, and, if possible, to answer the question: What does this Woman's Movement mean and what is its significance in our modern life? This is a question which everybody is asking to-day. A great many strange and startling things have been happening: women have been adopting an extraordinary line of action, and the world is taken completely by surprise. The whole thing is so new, so unexpected, so utterly unforeseen.

When the world first heard, for instance, of a woman standing up in a political meeting and persistently asking a question until she was thrown out of that meeting, its first judgment was that here must be a creature without brain power or reasoning faculty, acting under the pressure of excitement. Then gradually the fact leaked out that this woman of exceptionally brilliant intellectual attainments was one who had passed successfully through perhaps

the severest mental test open to men or women in this country. And the poor old world rubbed its eyes and wondered; it could make nothing of it.

Then other things happened in quick succession. Women, first by units and then by tens and then by scores, began to come out into the most public places and court public criticism and public ridicule, throwing aside all the conventions, throwing aside the traditions of their training, as well as their inherited instincts; and the world said—"Oh, these vulgar women, all they want is notoriety!" Then gradually the fact began to leak out again that many of them bore names of distinction, many of them were women who had already an honourable reputation, and once more the world was startled and surprised.

The next thing that the world heard was that a handful of women had met a force of mounted police and had refused to turn back, but had held right on in their determination to reach the House of Commons with a petition. "Masculine creatures!" it said. Then when people began to see the leaders of these militant women, they found that many of them were exceptionally small and fragile; that they were gentle and that they were sensitive, and essentially feminine; then the world rubbed its eyes again. And that is where it stands to-day. It is trying to sum up the position; it is puzzled; it is startled; it is interested; it is aroused, and it is saying—"What does it all mean?" And the world is not only asking this question—the world asks many questions—but in this instance it is actually waiting for the answer, and that is a thing it very seldom does.

The Expression of the Woman's Soul.

The first thing it means is that the woman's soul and being is to-day alive and awake, and is crying out for self-expression in the great life of the human world which is the ever new creation of human will and of human purpose. The woman is asking for a new thing and an old thing—an old thing in so far as she is asking for self-expression, because women in the past possessed this power of expression; but a new thing in so far as she is asking for the vote.

Why is she asking for the vote? Because the vote in modern times is the medium of expression; because the vote to-day is the symbol and medium of human will and human power shaping the circumstances and conditions of the outside human world. The world as we know it to-day is ruled by law, by custom, and by public opinion, and women are beginning to realise that it is a man-made world in the deepest sense of the word; it is a man-made and a man-ruled world. Its laws are men's laws; its rules of commerce and every-day business are men's rules. Its moral standard, its public opinion, is formed by men. And it is getting more and more so every day, for, with the extension of the male

franchise and the increase of the men's vote, the opinion of men counts for more and more in the world, and relatively the opinion of women counts for less and less. You see, men's opinion cannot be disregarded. Every politician and every reformer knows that. They have to put their questions, and they have to explain their plans of reform so that the men in the street, in their hundreds and thousands, can understand them. They have to take care that their question is put from the man's point of view; and the more and more men-voters there are, the more the purely male opinion and the purely male point of view counts, and the less and less the woman's point of view, the woman's thought, the woman's ideal, the woman's conception of things counts in the world.

I want to put it to you that this state of things is not in accordance with the laws of nature. The divine plan of the universe has ordained that the male and the female are the joint creators of the physical world. Women are placed in the world with their own conception of what life ought to be and to become, and yet they are denied all power in shaping or moulding their own environment or that of their children. In the organisation of this modern human world there is nothing that expresses the woman's point of view. There is nothing that tallies with the woman's soul. All the expression is man's expression; and so when women go out into the world they have got into the way of leaving their real self behind them. The women in this audience know that this is true. They know perfectly well that in no drawing-room, in no social gathering, in no intercourse with the men that they meet, do they dare to say what they really think and feel about things. They know perfectly well that men would not understand them if they did, for everything is arranged upon a plan different from their own, and upon a system which has taken no account of their point of view.

Now men, it is true, represent humanity, but they represent only one great half of humanity. And women represent the other half. The divine idea is made manifest in the woman and the man. Mazzini likens womanhood and manhood to the two strong wings which lift the soul of humanity towards the ideal we are destined to attain. Clip or cripple either wing and humanity sinks helplessly down and can only flutter in its ineffective attempt at flight.

The Woman's Movement takes its stand upon the ground that Womanhood is a great and glorious conception of the Divine Mind.

Womanhood as a glorious idea is the fundamental conception of all the greatest religions and of all the greatest of the old civilisations.

The glory of the idea of Womanhood is also a fundamental conception of language and of art. The poet, the philosopher, and the sculptor have ever expressed their visions, their dreams, their thoughts in the form of Manhood and Womanhood. The ideas that have tallied with the conception of Womanhood all

through our literature and all through the traditions of our human history are these: Wisdom, Truth, Justice, Liberty, Courage, and Aspiration. Womanhood has stood for Inspiration as figured in the Muses; for Culture as figured in the Graces. Art, Science, Destiny, Truth, these abstract sexless ideas are set forth and visualised under the form and figure of Womanhood.

Let us turn to History. Study the story of civilisation and you will see everywhere in the working out of life a corroboration of the idea expressed in poetry and in art. We are told by the learned and the wise that the foundation stones of civilisation were laid by the woman. Out of the woman's pity for the old and for the sick started the rudimentary idea of home, which has since become the centre of the organised community. The first primitive shelter, made of boughs, was made by women to shield the sick and wounded (abandoned by their comrades of the chase) from the sun and the storm.

I want to read you a little quotation from Elizabeth Robins, the dramatist and novelist:—

"That we are not monkeys disporting ourselves in trees is due, so say the wise men, to the home-making proclivities of one branch of the anthropoid family. Women purchased civilisation at the price of their liberty. When our immemorial forefathers and foremothers lived in cave and tree-crotch, the female asked no consideration and got no quarter. No nonsense in those days about her being the weaker, no hint of her then being a creature for whom special allowance must be made, not till she was the first specialist and began to specialise, not till she gave up gambolling in the airy leafage and took to making a home, to nursing not alone the young, but the sick and the old, making rude coverings as shelter from the cold, brooding long upon the dead, domesticating fire as her first handmaiden—not till then did she cease to compete on the lower plane of brute strength and cunning with the male. If these first women, making their wholly instinctive choice, had not chosen the keeping of the hearthstone warm by staying at home to keep the fire, if women of the past had not sat by the sick and the dying, not only would there never have been a woman question, but there would never have been a civilisation."

Down through the vista of long eras we see the mothers of the human race not only the first builders of the home but the first to conceive and to foster the idea of the family, the first tillers of the soil, the first teachers, the first gatherers of herbs and simples for the cure of diseases, the first practisers of the art of healing.

Out of the woman's care for the young has grown that beautiful development of differentiated love which makes the human world so beautiful to-day. Out of the body of the woman have come all the generations of humanity. Out of her body and out of her soul have been hewn the stepping-stones by which life has evolved from one stage of evolution to another.

Coming nearer to our own day, we see women playing all kinds of different parts on the stage of human history. We find that it was a woman who led the Ancient Britons against their Roman foes. Men and warriors did not scorn to serve and fight under their great chieftainess. Turning to our Saxon forefathers and foremothers, we remember that the Parliament of Saxons was a

Parliament of women—a Parliament that went with the warriors on the field of battle to meet in council and to decide for peace or for war. All the way through history we come upon the woman of resource, the woman of action, the woman who is the leader of her people. The warrior maiden, Jeanne d'Arc, who at the age of seventeen became commander-in-chief of the French army, and whose great genius (according to the testimony of her contemporary, the Duke d'Alencon) was the movement of artillery—Jeanne d'Arc has become the great type of the woman warrior of the Middle Ages. But we often forget that in her day the English Queen Consort, Margaret of Anjou, conducted twelve battles in person, and twice rescued her husband from prison and set him on the throne of England. As we turn the pages of history we gain some idea of how different was the position and the sphere of woman in the past from that assigned to the woman of to-day.

Do you remember that story of how in the reign of James II. Sir James Cochrane was condemned to death for joining in Argyle's rebellion, and how his daughter twice disguised herself and robbed the mail which brought the death warrant, until at last she obtained a pardon for her father from the King? I wonder what modern opinion would say about a young lady who did that? I rather think many people would feel that no deed, however heroic, would ever excuse a woman for appearing in man's attire. I think they would agree with the old lady who, when she heard how Mary Paton, after her husband's death, carried his ship in safety round Cape Horn, said: "More shame for her. Better every soul had gone to the bottom than that one woman should have stepped out of her sphere." That is an echo of the modern idea, the decadent idea of woman and woman's place in the world. It is not the old idea; it is not the idea of woman as she is presented to us either in our own history or in literature.

Shakespeare's Women.

The great literature of the past tells the same story as history does. We cannot do more to-night than turn to the greatest name upon our national roll of dramatists. Have you ever thought what an extraordinary thing it is that amongst the great number of Shakespeare's women there is only one who corresponds to the ideal of the modern woman? That is Ophelia. She is the only woman without self-sufficiency, self-reliance, resource, and initiative; the only woman whose life depends upon men's protection and care, and because she clings to men and because men fail her, she herself is a failure and her life ends in ruin. She is the one weak and dependent woman in the whole of Shakespeare's plays. All the other women are strong—strong for good or for evil, strong for initiative and for action. They are very different in every other respect, and they play a multitude of different parts in life, but all are women who have both mind and will of their own; women who think for themselves and act for themselves; women undaunted by difficulty and undeterred by danger. Shakespeare's women do

not shrink from donning men's attire if need be, or doing men's work if it is to save some human life that is dear to them, or to work out the salvation of those who but for them would be ruined or lost. All are women who for good or for evil shrink from nothing which will advance their purpose; always ready to meet the exigency of the hour; to carry out quick decisive action; to do the deed that they see must be done.

Now in view of all this evidence, how can we explain the extraordinary modern idea? The idea that woman must be subservient; that she must be dependent upon men; that she must fill only the passive, never the active roll in life; that she must obey, wait, and be patient, and must let men think and act for her, instead of thinking and acting for herself. The modern idea of woman is that she is a creature of sex value only, created to fulfil the will, the pleasure and the needs of men. Apart from her sex quality she is a being of no importance, a subsidiary creature, mentally and morally a secondary being whose life has no distinct meaning to the world.

A Period of Decadence.

How does it come about that women have so entirely fallen from their proper place? I believe that it is part of a bad inheritance. It is a remnant of that terrible period of decadence that came over English history during the time of the Georges. Everything in national life at that time touched the bottom. Even the debauchery of the Stuart Restoration lost what charm it had, and became mere gluttony and hoggishness. That was the time when wickedness and immorality prevailed in the highest places, and it was a time when women of all classes occupied a lower position than they have ever done before or since in the history of the country. It was then that the women of the upper classes were openly despised. They were spoken of in that day as "the sex"; apart from sex they were nothing, and of less than no account. That was the time when women of the poorer classes were turned out to work in mines and factories to earn money for their husbands; when every man in his own home was a petty slave-driver, who could make money out of his wife and children, sending them to work and claiming their wages.

It was a terrible time of misery and degradation for all. But when things come down to their lowest point, the merciful law of reaction begins to work. And towards the end of the Eighteenth Century and the beginning of the Nineteenth, both men and women rose and began to cry out for freedom, and for the power to work out their own salvation. Men and women fought together for the same deliverance, and after many years of suffering, the first victory was won, but it was a victory of which the fruits were reaped only by men. Women who had sown the seed with men in the bitter days were shut out from the joy of the harvest. Popular Government was given to the people in this

country, or rather to the men of this country. The franchise was extended on a democratic basis, but at the very moment when this was done, women for the first time were expressly excluded on account of sex from the British Constitution; and ever since 1832, when the Reform Act was passed, men have been working out their own salvation, slowly unwinding the coil that pulled them down to the ground.

But what about women! We cannot deny that the position of women has improved since those dark days of British History, for you cannot free one half of the human race without lifting up the other, so closely are men and women bound together. But it is also true that the disparity between men and women has grown ever greater and greater, and the distance is widening every day, for women are still held in the fetters which men have broken; they are still kept down under the weight of political disability and political subjection. They are not free as men have now been free for many years to cast from them the bad inheritance of those days of England's decline, and to win for themselves the birthright of freedom.

Now the Woman's Movement means a repudiation of the decadent conception, and a return of the old strong and beautiful ideas which have been slumbering like seeds in the earth and have come to life again in the Springtime of to-day. It is a return to the conceptions which have ruled during the greatest periods of human life. That is why the Woman's Movement is in the deepest sense a moral and a spiritual, quite as much as a political movement.

The Vote and the Home.

I am now going to deal with one or two questions that I am often asked with regard to the meaning of the Woman's Movement:—Some people say to me "Yes, but when women are politically free, will not the ideal of the Home be destroyed?" We have seen that the idea of the home was from the very commencement the woman's idea. If women are allowed self-expression, it does not mean that the home will be neglected, but the home will be much more sacred than it has ever been before. There is plenty of need for the home to be more beautiful and for home ideals to be more sacred than they are to-day. And that is part of the work which the triumph of the Woman's Movement will accomplish.

Then sometimes they say to me "But if women get their political freedom, will it not destroy the beautiful ideal of Motherhood?" and I have even heard men say that if women get the vote and if women sit in Parliament they will refuse to bear children, and the ideal of motherhood will decline. It seems to me that it is the most terrible thought that could possibly enter the human mind, that the continuance of the race depends upon a subjected and subservient womanhood. Surely this is the direst pessimism, the most awful atheism of which any human mind could be capable.

If that is true, well then, the sooner we get another flood, and men and women are swept off the face of this earth, the better. But thank God, that is not true! The passing on of life and everything that life means is the fundamental joy and beauty of the whole earth. It is the meaning of the beauty of the flowers, the song of the birds. It is the rapture of everything that has been created. And when women are free, then for the first time will the wonderful idea of motherhood be able to make its way through; then for the first time will it really be known and understood. For the sake of the children who are to be, if for no other reason, let us have a free and a fully responsible womanhood, for it is women who are the custodians of the future; they are the keepers of the Keys of Destiny; they are the Gates of Life. No human body or soul can enter into this life of the world, but it must enter through the body and soul of some woman, and it is for the sake of the race, it is for the sake of the generations to come, it is for the sake of the children above all, that we want women to be free to express themselves, free to live out their best and their highest ideals.

The Meaning of Chivalry.

Then they ask me sometimes "Ah! but if women get the vote and are equal with men, surely that will destroy all idea of chivalry." I reply that anyone who can ask this question has not the faintest idea of what chivalry is. The modern popular idea of chivalry is absolutely wrong. People think that if men get up and give a seat to a woman in the 'bus, that is chivalry. That is not chivalry! It may be protection of the weak; it may be a mark of pity and care on the part of men for those who are less capable than themselves. But pity and protection are not the essence of chivalry. In the old days there were masters and serfs, and very often there were good masters who protected their serfs and cared for them and looked after their interests, but you do not call kindness to servants chivalry. In those days, as always, there were benevolent and kindly men who protected child life, but you do not call the protection and the care of children, chivalry. Chivalry was founded essentially upon a deep sense of respect for women, verging upon religious reverence. In the old days a warrior went forth into the world bearing his lady's colours, and he looked upon himself as the arm and sword of a woman. Chivalry in its old form is not likely to come back into the world again, because old things do not come back in the same form in which they have lived before. But if you are going to get any counterpart of chivalry, anything that tallies with it, then you will have to get back the sense of deep respect for women on the part of men.

In "the days of Chivalry" the present political inequalities of men and women did not exist. Every public office in the State was open to women equally with men. Just as even in these days a woman can ascend the throne, and as the heir of the former ruler

can exercise all regal powers, so in the old days women could sit in Parliament, elect representatives and fill public offices as judges, sheriffs, governors of castles, and were not debarred by reason of sex from the political status and political privileges held by men. When they have re-won their birthright and due inheritance and are once again the political peers of men, then perhaps men will lose that sense of sex superiority, that attitude of indulgent (or sometimes not indulgent) contempt which is the very reverse of that sentiment in which the practice of chivalry was rooted. I believe that men already hold a far more really chivalrous attitude towards women since they realised that women could stand up for right and justice, could suffer for an ideal, could form a purpose and could carry it through in the face of all difficulty and opposition. I know one man who said the other day that he had always been in favour of the Enfranchisement of Women, but had never known what it was to feel so great a respect for women as he did since he had come in contact with the present agitation for the vote and had made acquaintance with individual members of the Women's Social and Political Union. I believe that is the thought of men to-day who understand, and it will be more and more the thought as time goes on and they understand better what this Movement means.

An Appeal to Women.

I have sometimes been asked what is the duty of women with regard to this Union. The other day I had a letter from a woman who said: "I leave this Movement to those who are less happily placed than I am myself." That was just the wrong attitude to take. It is the strong, the heart-whole, who must come into a militant Movement like this. It is to the healthy, the happy, and the fortunate, that this agitation should especially appeal. We have to say to those who would enter this fight "If you are weak, if you are sorrowful, if you are absorbed in yourself, then you cannot come along with us, because this way is hard; this way is difficult, only the strongest and the bravest can walk in it." We cannot do with a woman in our Movement who is weighed down by her own personal trouble. If she is burdened with care and grief, if she is disillusioned by disappointment, then let her go where the demand upon her patience, her courage, her temper, and her spirits, the demand upon her nerve, her body, and her blood, is less stern and urgent than it is with us. Only if she can leave her burden behind, only if she can forget herself and her sorrow, is she fit to come in and take up her sword and put through this fight. But if a woman is strong and happy, having had all her life the sheltering care, the good fortune that falls to the few in this world, then it is her duty, hers above all, to join us and to devote herself, heart and soul, to the triumph of the great moral ideals which are the inspiration of the Modern Woman's Movement.

Men and Women! Those who speak of the Woman's Movement and what it means to-day, are speaking the words of life. We tell you of a new great hope—a new great possibility for humanity. We speak to you of a better day that is dawning for the whole human family. We bring you the light of a great truth re-discovered. Those whose deeds are evil and whose thoughts are corrupt will still love darkness rather than light, but in spite of them the sun will rise and the day will dawn, and just as certainly will come the new time, and just as surely will it bring with it victory for the Woman's Cause, which is essentially the Cause of Progress and the great Cause of Humanity.

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